

Questioning Kitsch and the Myth of Future Theatre Audiences

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Why do all too many TYA companies offer “kitsch” or trivial entertainment to young audiences? What’s “wrong” with kitsch TYA, and what makes this widespread cultural phenomenon problematic? What long-term consequences might kitsch TYA have on the current and future viability of live theatre, especially given consumers’ obsessions with digital media technologies? In this paper, we continue our campaign against kitsch TYA and question the myth of the future audiences by extending the conversation we began after the first ITYARN forum (Klein and Schonmann).

The Power of Critics’ Defined Terms

Throughout the eighteenth century, British and German theatre critics and philosophers (e.g., Addison, Hume, Kant, and Schiller) defined, debated, and established notions of aesthetic “taste” by using this food metaphor to explain the sensory perceptions and emotional pleasures derived from artistic works (Korsmeyer 194-98). During the Industrial Revolution, as capitalist economies gained a stronghold across Europe, metaphors of aesthetic taste became entangled with material consumerism. While the etymological origin of the term “kitsch” remains unknown, kitsch artifacts emerged as a German phenomenon when the burgeoning *bourgeoisie* (middle business classes) sought to raise their social class status by purchasing and metaphorically consuming cheap pictures or imitative “sketches” of Romantic paintings in lieu of owning original and more expensive works of visual art.

Rather than apply the term “kitsch” to theatre, the term “legitimate” (in contrast to “non-legitimate” or kitschy entertainment) arose in early nineteenth-century England as a legal means of licensing classic plays and sentimental melodramas produced by a monopoly of three patent theatres that competed with other “minor” theatres (Fietz). A “legitimate” drama was defined by spoken dialogue that evidenced poetic qualities and superior literary worth, such that “the interest

of the piece is mental rather than physical.” “Non-legitimate” drama referred to all other forms of popular amusements in which spoken dialogue was accompanied by music and dance (Levine 75-76). By the late nineteenth century, cultural critics appropriated the terms “high- and low-brow” from racially charged phrenology to differentiate highly intellectual and aesthetically superior tastes from lower and imitative (or ape-like) preferences (Levine 221-22). Not until the 1930s during the Great Depression did art critics popularize the term “kitsch” by associating the commercialized appeal of plastic artifacts with “bad taste” and condemning imitative reproductions in contrast to avant-garde art (e.g., Kulka 13-16; Broch; Greenberg).

Based on art critics’ definitions of kitsch, we characterize kitsch TYA as any trivial or superficial, overly familiar, easily recognizable, and parasitic or redundant story copied from popular culture that does not enrich, refresh, or renew existing socio-cultural associations with more compelling world issues at large. Kitsch results from an overly mediated culture whereby theatre merely imitates and adapts other media, such as children’s literature (e.g., picture books) and animated cartoons on television and film, with old, worn-out, formulaic conventions that appeal primarily to excessively sentimental or melodramatic emotions. Although kitsch TYA for “small” children aspires to achieve the artistic status of theatre for “big” adults, its mass appeal in popular culture offers no added artistic value beyond superficial and nostalgic meanings made by those adults who take children to performances. While kitsch TYA meets parental demands for maintaining childhood happiness, we believe that it fails to nurture other emotions that children experience in the daily conflicts of their lives.

By denigrating the “bad tastes” of those who cannot afford to consume organically original cultural products, contemporary custodial critics continue to use cultural tastes as a litmus test to

indicate, monitor, and maintain distinct separations among lower, middle, and upper socioeconomic classes of consumers. As Hurley explains (59-62), consuming spectators are expected to *take* some intellectually useful product or profitable cultural benefit from theatre. In contrast, child spectators (like most adults) *give* their physical sensations and emotional pleasures to laboring actors on stage. Thus, kitsch entertainments are rendered useless and unproductive because “they leave nothing *new* to take away, no fresh insight or [revelatory] lesson,” as they merely confirm and recycle “the dominant moral ethos of culture” while reaffirming and reassuring emotional gratifications.

The Myth of Future Theatre Audiences

After critics delineated cultural tastes in the nineteenth century, the international children’s theatre movement began to emerge by start of twentieth century. It was then that a steadfast and ongoing mythic belief arose that if children experience “quality” theatre when they are young, they will come to appreciate, and even prefer, the inherent values of live theatre over “cheap moving-picture shows” and transform into future theatre patrons as adults with discriminating aesthetic tastes (e.g., Herts 73-75). This long-lived legend, promulgated by subsequent educators, presumes cause-and-effect changes over generations of theatre-goers. The story goes that “quality” theatre will somehow “cause” child spectators to appreciate its artistic values, and their emotional memories of these valued experiences will last through lifetimes “causing” grown children to return to “quality” theatre as adults. Not only will present spectators experience the immediate, beneficial effects of appreciating theatre at each generational juncture, but these short-term effects will also extend into the healthy, long-term future of theatre itself. As if by Darwinian fiat, the most successful “quality” theatre will survive and re-produce itself successively

for each subsequent generation and ensure the very survival of live theatre.

Given the adage that “children are our future,” it would seem plausible to expect child spectators to become future theatre patrons. Yet the pertinent question is, how many? According to national arts surveys, theatre is a minority form of artistic culture. On average, less than one-quarter of respective populations in industrialized nations attend theatre on an annual basis, depending on whether surveys start counting attendance at ages 6, 12, 15, 16, or 18. Only 23% attend theatre in the United Kingdom and Canada; and in Australia and the United States, this figure drops to 17%—and only 9% for non-musical plays in the US. Sweden (38%) and Denmark (39%) indicate the highest percentages when surveys combine children’s theatre, musicals, operas, and dance. In contrast, over half or more of these populations leave their homes to attend film at movie theaters (Council of Europe; National; Australian). These demographic surveys consistently find that those who attend theatre most frequently have higher levels of education, and in turn, higher incomes, than non-theatre goers. This audience composition sustains an ongoing perception and cultural expectation that theatre remains a “highbrow” art form for “elite” spectators only.

There is no longer any question that movies, television, and now the mobile Internet have replaced live theatre as popular entertainment. As theatre producers wrestle with how to attract younger audiences to their venues and festivals (13th International Symposium), critics around the world argue whether live theatre is in crisis or in danger of dying by identifying potential reasons for its anticipated demise (Delgado and Svich). Rather than simply blame the mass media for theatre’s potential demise, we discount the myth of future audiences by recalling how cultural hierarchies of theatre emerged during the mid-nineteenth century—exactly when theatre managers

began to attract women and their children to their venues (using the United States as a case study).

The Generational Role of Child Spectators

In the 1830s, pit, box, and gallery structures, imitated from European architecture, had already separated spectators by socioeconomic classes with different ticket prices. The cheapest seats held by the rowdiest “gallery gods” of the male working class dissuaded genteel patrons from attending. So managers began to offer separate forms of theatrical entertainment for distinct classes by divorcing cheap amusements that focused on physically humorous acts (e.g., minstrelsy, burlesque, and musical extravaganzas) from serious “legitimate” plays of literary quality that required “thinking” audiences. To attract women and their children (family audiences) in the 1840s, managers of museums expanded their “educational” exhibits with “lecture rooms” (a euphemism for theatre auditoriums) and offered “moral dramas” and continuous performances of variety acts from morning to night—all for an admission fee of twenty-five cents for adults and half-price for children (Dennett). In addition to censoring performers’ acts backstage, managers also tamed boisterous audiences on stage with curtain speeches and rules of etiquette printed in programs—just as TYA producers do today. Based on these commercial successes, managers of variety shows imitated these same strategies to legitimize vaudeville in the late 1880s by building more luxurious “palace” theatres near shopping districts that promised “cleanliness, comfort, and courtesy” (Wertheim 30-33). Matinees allowed middle-class women to leave their children with matrons at the theatre while shopping with the full assurance that vaudeville acts would contain no profanity, vulgar innuendos, or sexually seductive costumes. By the turn of the century, managers had succeeded in educating their adult and child audiences into passive silence, as

rambunctious spectators shifted their allegiances to emerging sports arenas (Butsch 61-65).

As cities expanded away from downtown areas, managers followed monied audiences by building more palatial theatres in upper-class neighborhoods; and, as a consequence, lower class audiences no longer felt welcome. Instead, from 1905 to 1915, laboring families and their children transferred their “dramatic instincts” to new store-front nickelodeons within walking distance downtown, with no segregated seating and low ceilings, where individuals paid five cents (a nickel) rather than seventy-five cents for gallery seating in legitimate theatres (Butsch 139-57).

With cultural hierarchies firmly established, critics engaged in circular reasoning over how to “elevate” the aesthetic tastes of future audiences by shifting the responsibility from managers to families and schools. Yet parents of every social class had already rejected calls to “rise above the foolish and injurious prejudice that there is any opposition between education and amusement” (Partridge 200). Instead, much like today, families left the responsibility of theatre education to the schools (and immigrants’ settlement houses) and seldom took their children to theatre, largely because few plays, other than Christmas-time “fairy plays” imitated from extravagant British pantomimes, existed (Clapp 7-10). As for schools, teachers found that even when engaging youth in productions, students refused to change their indiscriminate tastes for “cheap entertainments” as theorized (Barnes et al.). University educators denied the possibility of children’s theatre serving “any good purpose,” unless and until it attracted and sustained “the mature intelligences of men and women” as a commercially viable enterprise (Dickinson 118, 123). Given this cultural history by which “high and low” theatre became deeply embedded in the psyches of past generations, theatre scholars today continue to define children’s theatre as “nonlegitimate” entertainment by ignoring the significant generational roles of child spectators (e.g., Buckley 424).

Teaching Appreciation

As noted on its website, “ASSITEJ exists because of a deep and long-standing belief in the necessity of theatre in the lives of children and young people” (Vision). Yet children themselves perceive no such necessity, given their parents’ cultural habits over generational time (e.g., Saldaña). Nevertheless, given the necessity of theatre in artists’ lives, educators continue to believe steadfastly that young audiences can be “developed” and taught to appreciate the semiotic metaphors of theatre. Despite decades of intensive arts education in public schools, researchers still question whether young audience development initiatives ensure life-long attendance at performing arts centers and the extent to which parental socialization determines subsequent attendance at theatre (Vallance). As Matthew Reason reiterates (30), this unshakeable belief in young audience development for the future survival of live theatre ignores or refuses to value children as a present audience in their own right. As long as children are perceived as “unintelligent” persons with “inferior” or “lowbrow” minds in need of “higher” grade-level education, their preferential tastes for kitsch TYA may continue to face critical deprecation.

As the “weakest link” in theatre education, how do we educate children (and ourselves) to discern and appreciate the differences between artistic and kitschy features in theatre performances (Schonmann)? If it remains possible to educate for theatre appreciation, then by necessity, how shall we define the criteria for judging the quality of plays and productions when every theatrical feature is bound by its respective contexts? For example, if we agree that trivial superficiality is one criteria of kitsch TYA, we may perceive every instance of kitsch as superficial but not every instance of superficiality is kitschy. The same argument could be put forward for degrees of an actor’s performative authenticity, complexity, and emotional intensity. When self-

indulgent actors patronize child audiences with too much exaggerated sweetness, as if feeding them junk food, how much aesthetic power shall we grant to actors' performances (i.e., what they do to spectators) and how much responsive agency shall we grant to children (i.e., what they do to actors)? Does a kitschy performance with its flood of overly simplified sentiments block, anesthetize, paralyze, swallow, or overwhelm spectators' emotions and souls at the expense of awakening the cognitive and creative powers of their minds? Why not accept and allow children to create, think, and feel whatever sweet or sentimental emotions they choose to feel, express, and experience in response to actors' superficial, artificially sweet, and "kitschy cute" performances?

While many attempts to define aesthetic (or "spiritually" meaningful) experiences have failed, spectators know and understand instinctively the extent to which any performance gratifies their sensory pleasures and aesthetic tastes, even though they may not be able to verbally express their artistic knowledge. Yet how do we encourage them to move beyond arbitrary "I like or don't like X" statements after attending performances? How might spectators' subjective criteria, which remain wholly relative to individual taste preferences, complement rather than conflict with objective or so-called "universal standards" of theatrical art that have withstood the litmus tests of time? Or put another way, what mixtures (or food recipes) of artistic knowledge are necessary for "basic, deeper, and full" theatre appreciation (Hamilton 74, 146, 181)? How many cups of emotional sentiments (pathos), deciphered interpretations (logos), and moral implications (ethos) are necessary to encapsulate the multiple criterial values held by child and adult spectators? How might children's intuitively derived criterial values inform the more analytic knowledge of adult spectators, given that each faces the same sensory, emotion-bound, and cognitive task of perceiving, interpreting, and responding to the symbolic conventions of theatre?

When judging the artistic worth of performances, children value comprehensibility, involving dramatic action, humorous entertainment, informative child characters, and realism as their foremost aesthetic criteria. After viewing kitsch TYA, they indicate their basic level of understanding by describing and responding to the observable features of actors' facial expressions, physical gestures, bodily movements, and vocal intonations, as well as other salient features staged with scenery, costumes, lighting, and sound effects. Given their top criteria of comprehensibility and emotional involvement, it follows that many tend to appreciate the simple, familiar, expected, redundant, coherent, and repetitive features found in kitsch. At a deeper level of understanding, they distinguish between kitschy features (junk foods) and artistic features (wholesome foods) by comparing and contrasting respective examples at festivals. When faced with more novel (less imitative), complex, surprising, inconsistent, incongruous, and unpredictable features found in avant-garde theatre, it follows that they may not appreciate such performances because these artistic features fail to meet their litmus tests of comprehensibility and emotional gratification (Klein 47). If full appreciation depends on knowing artists' implicit intentions and judging how well respective intentions were achieved, then children may be at a disadvantage beyond surmising that artists simply wanted to please them with theatrical entertainment.

Kitsch TYA often intends to entertain youngsters by attempting to imitate the physical humor of two-dimensional cartoons. In such cases, physically animated actors strive to embody a third-dimension by exaggerating their emotions superficially as false presentations of authenticity. Children naturally give their emotions over to these self-indulgent actors because they want to physically experience and vocally express their emotional pleasures with real live actors whom they do not distinguish from fictional characters as critical experts might do. If child characters

offer them interesting information that resonates explicitly with their personal lives, then they may take away some deeper or more meaningful ideas to enrich and refresh their lives. However, when adult actors play child roles, they may also evaluate how well adults' physical and vocal embodiments compare with "real" children at deeper levels of understanding.

In sum, we aim to achieve the kind of theatrical experiences that will instill a life-long appreciation of theatre into adulthood. While definitions and criteria for evaluating kitsch TYA are subject to argumentative debates, we believe, like most artists, that our present child audiences deserve to experience the best possible theatre we can produce. As long as TYA companies continue to produce trivial kitsch, custodial critics will go on discriminating against this century-old profession based on widespread stereotypes about "uneducated" children—unless we find ways to nurture the power of criticism by young people along with adults. By allowing child critics to enlighten us with their own self-determined aesthetic criteria (e.g., through company-created blogs), we may relegate kitsch TYA and the myth of future theatre audiences to the dustbin of history.

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